

Better than Chasing a Rainbow: Practical ways parks CAN find new fiscal resources

Michael Seaman, Planning Division
California Department of Parks and Recreation

Your park and recreation agency is on the fiscal ropes. Your constituents say they want a skate park, youth center or dog park, but your bottom line won't allow it. You are reluctant to ask your Board for funds to slurry seal a parking lot that should have been resurfaced years ago. Your pool filter has one foot in the grave. The ball field dugouts are falling apart. It's been years since anyone could find "fat" in your budget; now budget cuts just go into bone. Sound familiar?

According to the California Outdoor Recreation Plan 2002, you can expect these kinds of fiscal challenges in a tight economy and in good times, too. The Plan notes that funding concerns transcend all issues affecting parks and recreation. It goes on to say, "Instability of funding reduces the effectiveness of providers at all levels of government to deliver quality, consistent and relevant facilities and services to meet the ever-growing demand." (CA Dept. of Parks and Recreation, California Outdoor Recreation Plan 2002, Sacramento, CA Dept. of Parks and Recreation, released May 2003, p. 42).

A new report, ***Paying for Parks: An Overview of Fiscal Resources for Local Park and Recreation Agencies*** may hold some answers for meeting program needs in light of increasing costs and greater demand for services. The report is a recent release from the Park and Recreation Technical Services (PARTS) Section of the Planning Division at State Parks. It covers, in one handy document, a variety of fiscal tools available to cities, counties and special districts for their park and recreation functions. It has helpful information on ways to get new revenues, even in a challenging fiscal climate.

The document is a must-read for anyone interested in how to pay for recreation facilities and services, whether the need is for capital improvements for parks or operating funds to expand recreation programs. The report encourages local park and recreation agencies to evaluate their budget requirements against the demand for services and to look for additional revenues the public would support. It then goes into detail on several possible revenue sources:

- Marketing and Customer Service
The report notes agencies may be able to strengthen their customer base. By strategically targeting relationships with customers, agencies can proactively develop new or expanded customer bases and provide the necessary service adjustments.
- Impact Fees on New Developments
The report describes means whereby approval of new developments can provide revenues for additional facilities to be established or for existing facilities to be improved. These opportunities are available if certain procedures are followed carefully. For these purposes, state law provides tools such as a Mello-Roos District and dedications or in-lieu fees under the Quimby Act of 1975.
- Assessments on Existing Property
Revenues can be derived from benefit-based assessments on existing property if supported by the community. Specific procedures for assessments, spelled out in 1996 by Proposition 218, are discussed in the report. The initiative requires elections for special benefit assessments. Though the courts are still influencing how the law is

applied, several jurisdictions have gained new park and recreation revenues from property assessments in the wake of Proposition 218.

- Grants

Even in tight fiscal times, many federal, state and foundational grants are available to park and recreation agencies. Grant opportunities exist for a wide variety of purposes and many can help pay for park and recreation needs. The report suggests that local agencies look for the alignment between their request and the objectives of the grant programs. The request for funds should provide a solid basis for a positive response from the fund provider. The report also points grant-seekers to State Parks' web site for assistance. The web site (http://www.parks.ca.gov/default.asp?page_id=22226) will soon present viewers with a helpful report, "Getting a Grip on Grants."

- Volunteers and Donations

Another source of fiscal support is one derived from the generosity of individuals and groups in your community. Agencies can seek out volunteer labor and solicit donations from the community to support recreation programs and improve facilities. Many local agencies have established non-profit "friends of parks" programs for this purpose. The report gives information on policy initiatives that promote volunteerism at both the federal and state level. These can help agencies get connected with volunteers in their community.

- Collaboration and Public-private Partnerships

The report points out that a local park and recreation agency can gain access to new fiscal resources to serve the community by collaborating with like-minded organizations. Cooperative opportunities may exist with other public agencies, non-profit community-based organizations, and for-profit firms. Just one example is the emerging opportunity for before-and-after-school programs, for which substantial expansion is expected due to the recent passage of Proposition 49. As in all relationships, park and recreation agencies should look for true partnerships that bring lasting value, rather than one-time convenience arrangements.

So there really are many ways for local park and recreation agencies to enhance their budgets. Local agencies that can demonstrate wise use of existing public funds have opportunities to locate new resources for their budgets and programs, whether within their immediate spans of control or not. This document points the way. It includes a substantial number of references and case examples.

The extensively detailed documentation is given not to overwhelm, but to instead serve as a doorway to the rich information sets that exist for the various subjects addressed. For this purpose, web addresses have been included in the end note references of the report. To expedite the search for information, each subject area's discussion concludes with a capsule summary of some of the most useful sources.

The report is available on the Department of Parks and Recreation Planning Division's web site at <http://www.parks.ca.gov/pages/795/files/paying4parksfinalsaved.pdf>. For questions regarding the report, please contact Michael Seaman at (916) 651-8693 or at mseam@parks.ca.gov.